Highbrow meets lowbrow in Netflix's art world/horror mashup Velvet Buzzsaw

Enlarge / Reunited: former *Nightcrawler* co-stars Rene Russo and Jake Gyllenhaal play a manipulative art dealer and snobby art critic who become enthralled with a sinister stash of paintings by an obscure artist.

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An obscure artist dies and leaves behind a trove of strangely alluring paintings, becoming a posthumous success, in the Netflix original film *Velvet Buzzsaw.* It turns out to be literally art to die for.

(Some spoilers below.)

Rene Russo (Frigga in *Thor*) and Jake Gyllenhaal (Mysterio in the forthcoming *Spiderman: Far From Home*) co-starred in writer/director Dan Gilroy's 2014 thriller, *Nightcrawler*, a dark, disturbing tale that skewered the "if it bleeds, it leads" mentality of broadcast news. The triumvirate is back in top eccentric form with *Velvet Buzzsaw*, this time targeting the indulgent narcissism and greed of the Los Angeles contemporary art scene.

Gyllenhaal plays Morf Vandewalt, a snooty, sexually fluid art critic—"Critique is so limiting and emotionally draining"—whose reviews can make or break a career. His tastes

are highly *simpatico* with those of ruthlessly pragmatic gallery owner Rhodora Haze (Russo). “We don’t sell durable goods, we peddle perception,” she tartly observes. Rhodora’s assistant, Josephina (Zawe Ashton, *Nocturnal Animals*), finds her reclusive elderly neighbor dead in the hallway, and discovers the man—one Vetril Dease—was a gifted artist, with an apartment filled with canvases. When she learns he has no surviving family, she steals the stash, even though Dease had left explicit instructions that all his art was to be destroyed upon his death.

Josephina and Rhodora strike a bargain to market Dease’s paintings to collectors eager for a fresh addition to the “outsider art” category. When the people who benefited from the buying and selling of Dease’s work begin disappearing and/or dying under mysterious circumstances, Morf (who’s been having disturbingly vivid visual and aural hallucinations) is convinced something is terribly wrong.

- Aspiring art dealer Josephina (Zawe Ashton) discovers a neighbor’s body, and discovers he was a brilliant unknown artist.
- Gallery owner Rhodora Haze (Rene Russo) strikes a bargain with Josephina for marketing the dead artist’s paintings.
- “We have a taste relationship,” the sexually fluid art critic Morf Vandewalt (Jake Gyllenhaal) tells Josephina.
- Toni Collette plays Gretchen, curator for an LA museum, who admires an installation dubbed “Sphere.”
- “Have you ever felt invisible?” Animatronic Hoboman proves a critical failure.
- Jon Dondon (Mark Sturridge) runs a rival gallery trying to poach burnt-out artist Piers (John Malkovich) from Rhodora.
- Morf is not enthralled by one of Piers’ alcohol-fueled creations.
- One of Vetril Dease’s disturbing paintings.

- The tormented canvas of an outsider artist
- Look at an original Dease painting long enough, and it… moves?
- A mysterious suicide
- Sure, it's edgy, but is it art?
- Josephina finds herself awash in paint colors.
- "If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you." Yeah. What Nietzsche said.

Dease's paintings cast an irresistible spell on whoever views them. "If you look at it long enough, it moves," up-and-coming street artist Damrish (Daveed Diggs, *Blindspotting*) tells Josephina at one point, unable to tear his gaze away. The paintings seem to have a kind of sentience, "watching" those who are observing them; perhaps it is the act of being seen that gives them that power (and why Dease wanted them all destroyed). The camerawork accentuates this; there are several shots where we view the characters from the perspective of the artwork they're viewing, calling to mind Friedrich Nietzsche's dictum in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you."

There are hints that Dease had a dark, twisted history, and that he used some unconventional materials in his paintings (described as "personal effects" by the conservationist who catalogues the collection). But Gilroy is happy to keep the specifics vague. For instance, is it the ghost of Dease inhabiting his art and taking revenge, or has his art taken on a life of its own? Dease was trying to destroy the paintings when he suddenly (and mysteriously) died, after all. He might well have been the first victim. The deliberate ambiguity works, in my opinion; sometimes it's better to leave details to the viewer's imagination.

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Gilroy worked with several outside consultants to get the "art

speak” in his script down pat. But anyone expecting *Velvet Buzzsaw* to be a searing satirical indictment of the 21st century fine art enterprise is bound to be disappointed. Yes, the film pokes fun at the jargon, pretentiousness, and naked greed often found in such circles, but it targets the lowest-hanging fruit most ripe for mockery. At one point, a character mistakes a garbage bag for art, and when a body shows up in a museum, visitors assume it’s part of the exhibit. The stellar cast all deliver excellent performances, but the characters are more colorful types than complex personalities (whether you deem them mere stereotypes or horror archetypes likely depends on your perspective).

Ultimately, this is supernatural horror, checking off the tropes of the genre with tongue firmly in cheek. It just happens to be set in the art world—a clever mashup of highbrow and lowbrow. If Robert Altman had ever dipped his toe into horror, it might look something like this. Frankly, I haven’t had this much fun watching an artist (or in this case, the art) take revenge since the 1973 camp classic *Theater of Blood*. (Vincent Price plays an aging Shakespearean actor who begins murdering all the critics who savaged his performances over the years—offing them in ingenious ways inspired by Shakespeare’s plays.)

Velvet Buzzsaw has less obvious camp, but it’s best enjoyed in the same spirit. If you relax and enjoy the film on its own terms, and don’t look too hard for some deeply profound meaning, it’s a smartly satisfying romp.

Velvet Buzzsaw premiered last month at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival. It is currently streaming on Netflix and playing in select theaters.

[embedded content]
Trailer for *Velvet Buzzsaw*.
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